

Message Text

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ACTION SS-30

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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

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INFO AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV IMMEDIATE

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI PRIORITY

S E C R E T TUNIS 206

EXDIS

DEPT PASS CAIRO (FOR SECRETARY)

TEL AVIV FOR SECRETARY

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR: TS

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA SEEKS TO REASSURE US

CONCERNING TUNISIAN-LIBYAN UNITY

1. I WAS CALLED TO PALACE THIS MORNING, JANUARY 14, WITH 25 MINUTES' NOTICE. THERE PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA SOUGHT TO ASSURE ME THAT TUNISIAN-LIBYAN UNITY IS CONSISTENT WITH US INTERESTS. BEFORE SEEING PRESIDENT I HAD PREPARED EMBASSY'S ASSESSMENT OF UNITY ANNOUNCEMENT, WHICH REMAINS LARGELY UNCHANGED BY BOURGUIBA CONVERSATION (ASSESSMENT BEING CABLED SEPARATELY). IN FACT, CONVERSATION REINFORCES MY CONCLUSION THAT BOURGUIBA IS EXTREMELY TIRED, OVERWROUGHT, AND SUBJECT TO MENTAL LAPSES, THAT HE HAS NOT RPT NOT THOUGHT OUT UNITY PROGRAM CLEARLY.

2. PRESIDENT OPENED CONVERSATION BY SAYING THAT HE HAD CALLED ME IN TO INFORM ME THAT TUNISIAN-LIBYAN FEDERATION IS IN EVERYONE'S INTEREST, INCLUDING US. TUNISIA CONTINUES TO VALUE ITS STRONG FRIENDSHIP FOR US. WHILE MENTIONING THAT MASMOUDI HAD PLAYED KEY ROLE IN ARRANGING AGREEMENT, HE NOTED THAT DIRECTOR OF
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PRESIDENT'S OFFICE CHATTI AND TAHAR BELKHODJA, MINISTER OF INTERIOR, HAD GONE TO ALGIERS TO EXPLAIN DECISION TO BOUMEDIENNE. BOURGUIBA SAID THAT HE HOPED THAT SOMETHING COULD BE SET UP BY JUNE, BUT ADDED, "WE WILL SEE". "THAT

IS WHAT I WANTED TO TELL YOU," HE CONCLUDED.

3. I TOLD THE PRESIDENT THAT USG RESPECTS HIS DECISIONS, AND THAT OBVIOUSLY FEDERATION IS MATTER BETWEEN TUNISIA AND LIBYA. BUT, I CONTINUED, I HAD SOME QUESTIONS I WANTED TO ASK THE PRESIDENT. IN CONSONANCE WITH TRADITIONAL CLOSE US-TUNISIAN RELATIONSHIP, DID HE MIND IF I WERE VERY FRANK? THE PRESIDENT NODDED VIGOROUSLY.

4. I RECALLED THAT ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS THE PRESIDENT HAD STATED THAT ARAB UNITY OF ANY KIND COULD ONLY BE ACHIEVED AFTER CAREFUL PREPARATION AND BY STEPS, AND THAT IT WOULD TAKE "GENERATIONS". HOW DID THE PRESIDENT RECONCILE THESE OFT-REPEATED VIEWS WITH SUDDEN TO UNITE WITH LIBYA? THE PRESIDENT SAID THERE WAS NO CHANGE. THERE WOULD HAVE TO BE A REFERENDUM FIRST AND TIME WOULD BE NEEDED TO SET UP A CONSTITUTION. "LIBYA HAS NO CONSTITUTION," HE SAID.

5. BUT, I CONTINUED, HE HAD SEEMED TO INDICATE THAT UNITY OF SOME SORT WOULD BE ACHIEVED BY JUNE. WOULD THIS BE ONLY FIRST STEP OR WAS THIS DEFINITIVE? THE PRESIDENT WAS NON-COMMITAL.

6. I ASKED WHETHER HE ENVISAGED A TRUE POLITICAL UNION OR A LOOSE CONFEDERATION, WITH THE TWO GOVERNMENTS CONTINUING TO MAINTAIN SEPARATE IDENTITIES SIDE BY SIDE? HE SAID, YES, THERE WOULD CONTINUE TO BE TWO SEPARATE ENTITIES, BUT HE ENVISAGED FORMS OF ECONOMIC UNION.

7. I ASKED IF THERE WOULD BE ONE CAPITAL AND, IF SO, WHERE WOULD IT BE? HE FIRST REPLIED TUNIS, BUT THEN ADDED THAT THE CAPITAL WOULD PROBABLY SHIFT BACK AND FORTH. I SAID WHAT ABOUT THE AMBASSADORS IN TUNISIA? WOULD THEY HAVE TO SPEND SIX MONTHS IN LIBYA? "NO", SAID THE PRESIDENT, "YOUR AMBASSADOR TO LIBYA WILL REMAIN IN TRIPOLI AND YOU WILL REMAIN HERE."

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8. I NOTED THAT TUNISIAN AND LIBYAN SOCIETIES ARE QUITE DIFFERENT. TUNISIANS PRIDE THEMSELVES FOR THEIR OPENNESS, WHILE LIBYAN SOCIETY IS MORE CLOSED AND SOMEWHAT FANATIC. "YES," REPLIED THE PRESIDENT, "THEY ARE FANATIC."

9. DID THE PRESIDENT NOT FEAR THAT A FEDERATION WOULD OPEN THE WAY TO QADHAFI'S EFFORTS TO SUBVERT TUNISIA? THE PRESIDENT REPLIED IN THE NEGATIVE, SAYING THAT HE HAD A TOUGH MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR IN BALKHODJA "WHO WOULD TURN THE SCREWS" (ACCOMPANIED BY HAND GESTURE). BUT, I CONTINUED, WILL BELKHODJA BE MINISTER OF INTERIOR FOR BOTH COUNTRIES? "YES", SAID THE PRESIDENT, "BUT HE WILL HAVE A LIBYAN ASSISTANT. DON'T FORGET HOW I

PUT QADHAFI IN HIS PLACE AT THE PALMARIUM LAST YEAR."

10. SEEKING TO ELICIT SOME INDICATION AS TO WHETHER FEDERATION ANNOUNCEMENT HAD BEEN PLANNED IN ADVANCE, I NOTED TO PRESIDENT THAT EVERYONE WAS TAKEN BY SURPRISE. ANNOUNCEMENT HAPPENED VERY FAST. THE PRESIDENT NODDED IN AGREEMENT BUT MADE NO COMMENT.

11. REALIZING THERE WAS NOT MUCH POINT IN PURSUING MATTER FURTHER, I TOOK MY LEAVE AND WISHED THE PRESIDENT A GOOD REST IN SWITZERLAND. HE SAID THAT HE WAS POSTPONING HIS DEPARTURE UNTIL AFTER THE 18TH OF THIS MONTH BECAUSE SADAT IS VISITING TUNIS ON THAT DAY. HE IMPLIED VISIT IS IN CONNECTION WITH UNITY ANNOUNCEMENT.

12. COMMENT: AS CAN BE READILY SEEN FROM FOREGOING, PRESIDENT MADE LITTLE SENSE. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT HIS SIX WEEKS REST IN SWITZERLAND WILL BRING HIM BACK DOWN TO EARTH SOMEWHAT OR IT MAY BE THAT HIS PERMANENT ILLNESS IS GETTING THE BETTER OF HIM. I WAS STRUCK BY FACT THAT AT SIGNATURE CEREMONY AT JERBA, SHOWN ON TV, HE LOOKED AND ACTED AS IF HE WERE IN A TRANCE. IN UNACCUSTOMED MANNER HE STAYED IN THE BACKGROUND AND ALLOWED MASMOUDI TO TAKE THE FRONT AND CENTER. HE FUMBLER IN SIGNING THE AGREEMENT. PRESIDENT OBVIOUSLY IS UNCLEAR WHAT UNION IS TO INVOLVE. HE REVELS IN THE GLORY OF BEING PRESIDENT OF BOTH
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COUNTRIES, AND EVIDENTLY SOMEHOW THINKS THAT IN THE PROCESS HE CAN RETAIN THE TUNISIAN IDENTITY AND TUNISIAN PARAMOUNTCY IN THE RELATIONSHIP. HE WILL SOON BE BROUGHT DOWN TO EARTH WHEN HE REALIZES THE NUMEROUS DIFFICULTIES -- AND DANGERS -- MILITATING AGAINST TUNISIAN-LIBYAN UNION. AS WE CONCLUDE IN SEPARATE CABLE, WE BELIEVE SUCH A UNION IS UNLIKELY.
SEELYE

NOTE BY OC/T: NOT PASSED CAIRO

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